

CHILDHOOD FEARS

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ABSTRACT Fears and anxiety, whether they are part of natural development or in response to a specific, threatening situation, represent adaptive responses warning the child to take safety precautions and to prepare for many challenges encountered as he grows up.

Fear and anxiety are, like most other psychological phenomena, during childhood, intertwined and difficult to distinguish. Intensive and long lasting fears during the period of intertwined growth represent the most powerful factor of vulnerability for anxious disorders during the period of adulthood (Poulton et. al., 1997).

Children's fears are described as a reaction to the perceived threat which includes the avoidance of that threatening situation or object, the subjective feeling of discomfort accompanied by symptoms of physiological instabilities related to specific physical systems and physiological changes (Perkins et al., 2007).

Fears mainly include simultaneous reactions to specific stimuli such as natural events or abstract situations, while anxiety is considered to be a diffuse reaction to non-specific stimuli (fear of unknown).

The aim of this research paper is to question and perceive the attitudes of educators in preschool institutions related to fears in preschool children. Aspects of research are examined from the perspective of those who work directly and spend most of their time with children – Preschool educators.

KEY WORDS: fear, anxiety, preschool children, educators.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fears refers to a group of feelings that a person faces when feeling endangered and unable to face the object or situation that endangers him (Castenada, et al., 1956).

Fear causes psychological and physical reactions in the organism. It represents a combined reaction of the sympathetic part of the nervous system, hormones, hypothalamus (portion of diencephalon) and psychological mechanisms (Born, 2008). The central nervous system registers fear during the intrauterine period (Poulton et. al., 1997). It is inherent, a genetically programmed reaction to threatening or painful stimuli.

On a physiological level, it manifests itself as an increased heart rate, heightened muscle tonus, higher

blood pressure, higher adrenaline production, rapid breathing, dry mouth, etc. (Gallahue, 2010)

Exposure to fear also changes ones behaviour, it manifests itself as a characteristic posture, as a reaction to danger developed from a biological point of view (Perkins et al., 2007).

Every organism is equipped with defence mechanisms; therefore fear is considered a feeling in service of adaptation.

Among the first fears experienced by newborns, the most important are the fear of falling and the fear of sudden noises. Newborns will also react with fear to different types of pain.

Table 1 Different types of fear

Level	State	Fear
1	Trauma	Automatic and nonspecific fear
2	Danger	Fear in the service of <i>I</i> , affect created by foresight, controlled and used as an alarm signal
3	Panic	Failure in controlling the <i>I</i> , emotional overwhelm, regression to the first level (state of trauma)

(Todorović, M: 2013:57)

The first two factors are included in the defence system of the organism, and at third level – *panic* represents a pathological state that sets in as a reaction to the fear signal, from the second level (danger), which isn't working or isn't offering a proper response, i.e. adequate danger assessment.

From a developmental point of view, the child becomes capable of understanding anxiety as an alarm signal during his second year of life. With this ability the child can become able to manage anxiety in different ways (Borovčanin, 2008). If the child doesn't develop this coping mechanism, a traumatic anxiety could overwhelm his ego. For example, every child becomes uncomfortable when faced with larger snarling animals, as a manifestation of self-preserving instinct. Any big animal can be dangerous, so every child will feel helpless around it (Branković, 2011).

Fear in the service of *I* (level 2), prevents the child from neglecting real dangers that big and wild

animals could pose. The reality of this danger is best represented in the child's abhorring or seeking help from parents (Cukaro, 2007)

2. CASE STUDY. THE EXAMINATION OF CHILDREN'S FEAR

An interview with children following the nursery school "Crvenkapa" from Pančevo (Serbia) was conducted; the goal of this research being an empirical confirmation of childhood fears described from the children's point of view.

For that purpose children age four to six years were asked one question – *why are they experiencing fear when their parents are not close?*

Nine children participated in the interview describing the feeling of fear in their own way.

Children had different answers on the question; they presented facts from personal experience, as well as stories from their surroundings.

M. M. (4): "I don't like it when mom is late to pick me up from school; I'm worried that she'll forget about me".

A. T. (4): "I'm afraid of being left alone, when everyone is gone. Some thief is stealing mom, dad, or big sister".

M. Č. (4): "I like small elephants, but I don't like big ones because they blow from their trunk and can blow me away from mom and dad".

D. M. (5): "My dad lives in one house, and my mom and me in another. I'm sad when I can't see my dad".

A. S. (5): "When mom went to hospital, I was afraid, because she said she might not be back".

Ž. S. (6): "I love my parents very much. When they are not well, or when they are sick, I'm afraid I'll lose them".

D. C. (6): "My mom had long hair, and then she went somewhere and came back with short hair. I was afraid she was replaced with another woman".

B. B. (6): "Sometimes I fear my mom won't come back, because I can't feed myself".

Children's responses on the question *why are they experiencing fear when their parents are not close?* clearly demonstrate separation anxiety (fear of separation).

During the child's everyday life, an unexpected delay of any family member often causes disquiet and anxiety.

Certain responses clearly show that fear of abduction in fact shows fear of separation. In other cases, the child is worried about the abduction of other people, especially of the mother.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The goal of this research was represented by the examination of teachers' position concerning preschool children's fears.

The research aimed to obtain an answer on the teacher's ability to recognize and deal with children's fears.

Teachers in preschools must understand themselves, their motivation, stances, wishes, attitudes, and take active role in constructing their knowledge and skills, all these qualities making teachers competent for monitoring children's development and recognizing their developmental fears.

The research includes samples obtained from 32 respondents, teachers from four preschool institutions, from Pančevo – "Dečja radost" (preschools: "Crvenkapa", "Bubamara", "Slavuj" and "Ljiljan"). All respondents were women (see Fig.1), most of them working mainly in preschool institutions (Fig. 2)

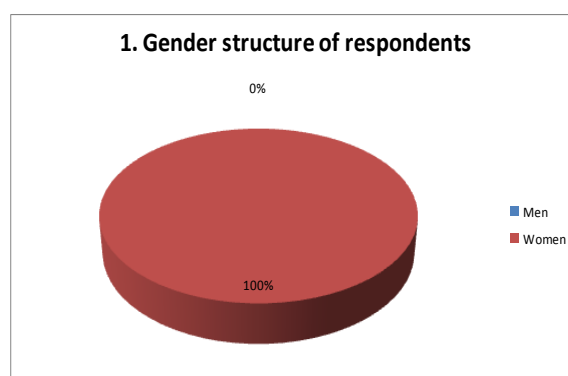


Fig. 1 Respondents' gender

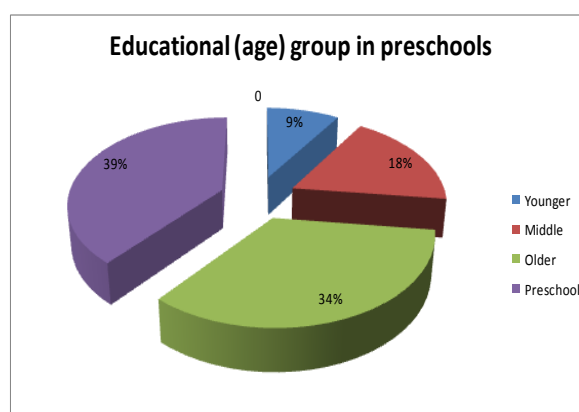


Fig. 2 Age categories

The fact that fear is one of the most common emotions manifested during childhood was taken into consideration during this study.

The problem studied in the research was – what, according to teachers, is the most common cause of preschool children fears; how does it manifest itself,

and which activities can help children overcome their fears, during the working day.

3.1. Research hypothesis

Based on the aforementioned tasks and goals, two hypotheses were formulated (general and specific hypotheses).

The general hypothesis refers to the goal – Fears in preschool children are often caused by the environment they grew up in, by unstable relationships inside their families and problems with adapting to a community.

The specific hypothesis refers to tasks, such as:

1. Children would be less afraid if adults that spend a lot of time with them could better understand their fears.
2. Teachers are often met with fear while working with children.
3. According to teachers, developmental fears have a natural occurrence.
4. Fears manifest themselves differently among preschool children, most frequent reactions being: disquiet, frequent crying, and a need for teacher's protection.

3.2. Research goal and tasks

The research goal refers to examining and perceiving how and in what ways teachers can help children overcome or lessen their fear.

The research task is represented by testing teachers' understanding of developmental fears. General tasks are divided into specific tasks:

1. Examining how seriously do adults that spend lot of time with children perceive their fears.
2. Examining how often do teachers encounter developmental fears.
3. Examining how do fears most often manifest in preschool children, according to their experience.
4. Determining whether teachers can calm the child who is upset and scared.

3.3. Research variables and methods used

To successfully complete the research the following variables were applied:

Independent: teacher's knowledge of developmental fears in children and a commitment to freeing children from fear.

Dependent: gender, years of experience.

To reach as much information as possible about the ways that teachers use when working with children that manifest developmental fears we used descriptive method.

This method is focused on improving scientific knowledge i.e. toward generalization; it includes describing, gathering, data management, comparison, contradistinction, evaluation, and interpretation.

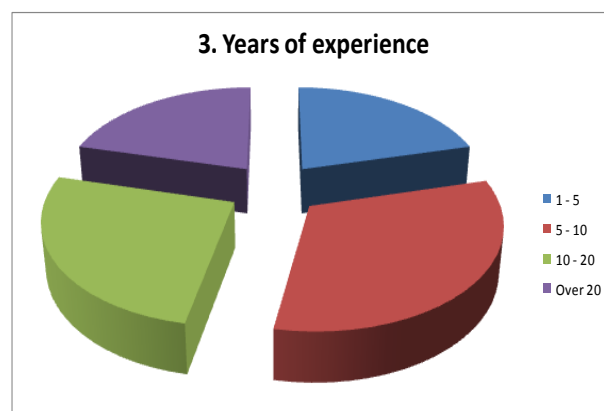


Fig. 3 Experience

Techniques used in this research are represented by a questionnaire designed for preschool teachers and an interview for these teachers. Teachers answered the questionnaire in a written form and gave oral answers to the interview.

The questionnaire that used is composed of seven questions (close-ended type) that refer to teachers' stances and opinions on developmental fears faced during their everyday activities with children.

This research sample is set on the territory of Pančevo. The sample is made of 32 respondents. Every respondent filled in the questionnaire, anonymous and with no time limit.

4. RESULTS

The results of this research indicate that over 58% of respondents think that people give too much importance to children's feelings.

In addition, 58% of teachers agree that children would be less scared if adults that spend the most time with them had better understanding of their fears.

The claim that teachers cannot do anything with children's fears, if the child refuses to talk about it, is sustained by 36% of the respondents. Only 6% completely disagree with this claim and believe that teachers can do something to convince the child to talk about his fears.

Forty two percent of respondents think that the child has a problem if he experiences some kind of fear. According to teachers, the main cause of fear in preschool children is an unstable relationship within the family (46%).

From the research and the interview conducted with teachers from different preschool institutions, the conclusion that teachers are aware and pay attention

to children's fears, that they have experience in recognizing fear in children and can calm an upset and scared child is a reasonable one.

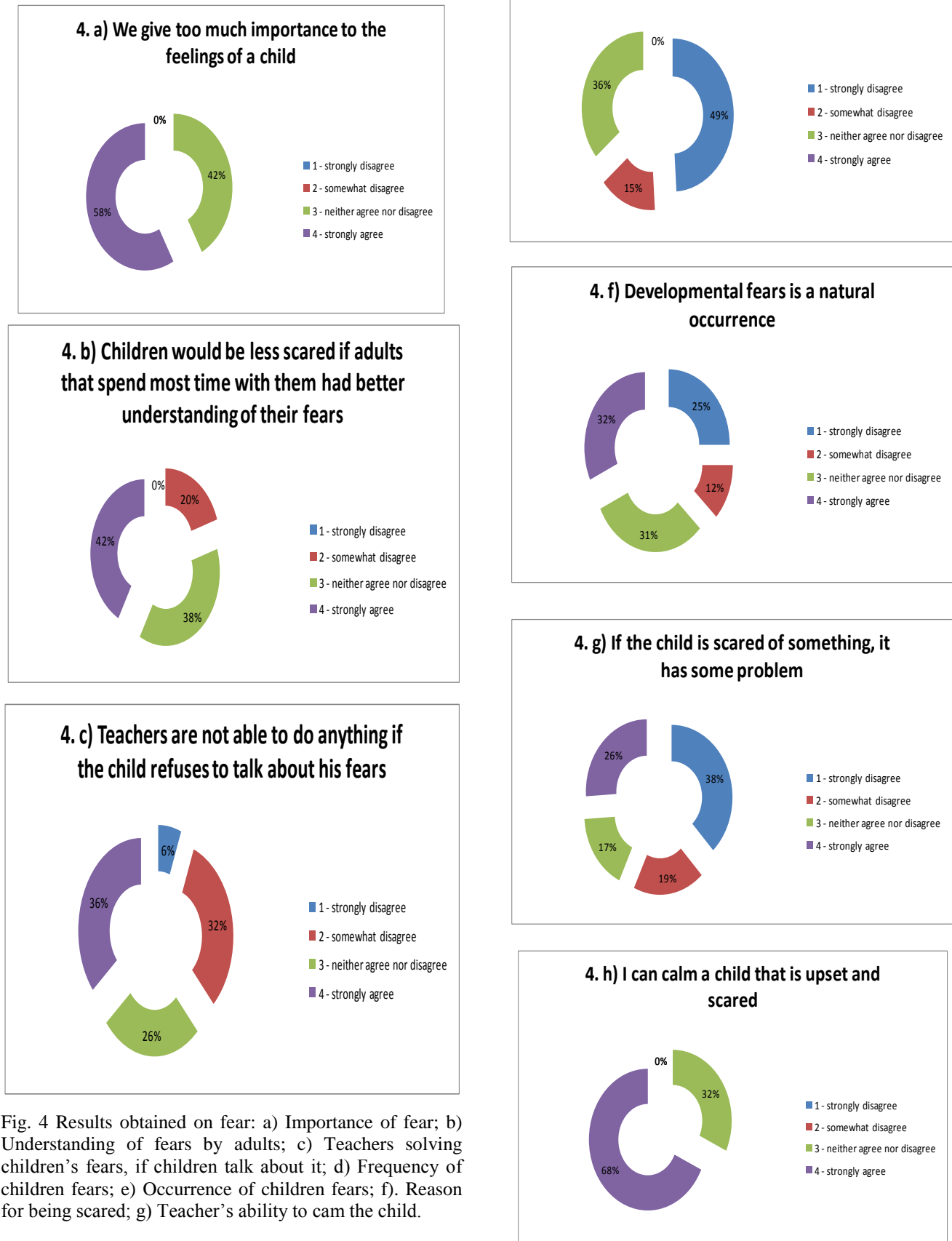


Fig. 4 Results obtained on fear: a) Importance of fear; b) Understanding of fears by adults; c) Teachers solving children's fears, if children talk about it; d) Frequency of children fears; e) Occurrence of children fears; f). Reason for being scared; g) Teacher's ability to calm the child.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Children's fears represent a type of child adaptation to a new and unknown surrounding. Children's fears are connected to different developmental problems specific to every age of development; thus, for example, fear as a characteristic of a six months child can be caused by the presence of loud noises or sudden loss of a solid surface (Branković, 2011).

The results of the study, suggest that families have an important role in contributing, recognizing and solving children's fears, an unstable relationship with family members leading to different types of fear. The environment is in this case the second reason for childhood fear. A reaction to this fear, during the preschool period, is that of seeking protection from the person nearby, in this case the preschool teacher, a reaction which is in most cases accompanied by crying and anxiety.

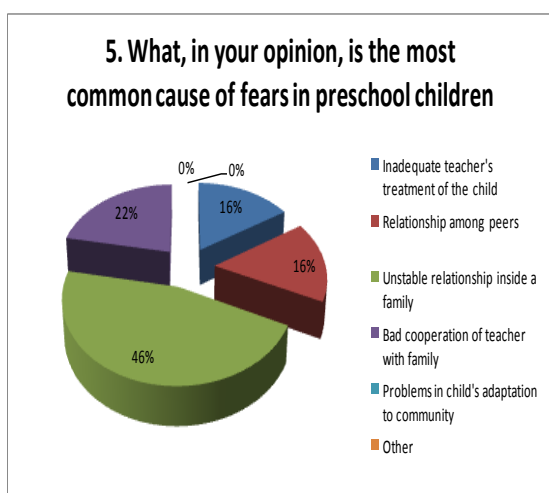


Fig. 5 Common causes of fear for preschool children

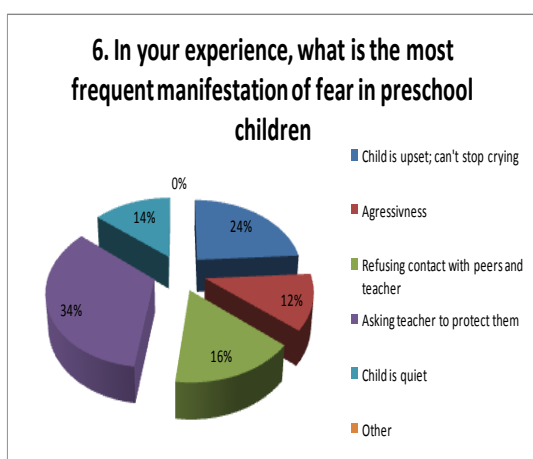


Fig. 6 Fear manifestation in preschool children

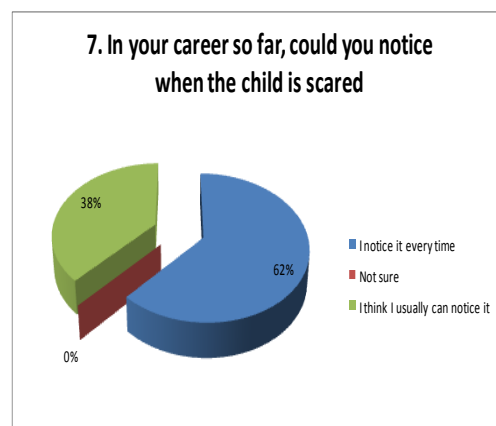


Fig. 7 Fear acknowledgment

Fear of unknown people and situations with separation anxiety are typical for the period from six to eighteen months, when main developmental problems are connected to affective bond to parent figure.

From the age of 2 to 3 years, fear of animals is linked to child's exploration of the outdoors and objects in it, and with question of establishing child's independence and autonomy.

Fear of the dark, imaginary creatures, storms, and the loss of parents (or caretakers) are characteristic to children aged 3 to 6 years. These are deriving from problems that are characteristic to that specific developmental period, and that are connected to developing initiative and confidence (Todorović, 2013).

Fears and anxieties are an integral part of every preschool child's development. Children's fears can be described as a reaction to a perceived threat that includes evasion of that threatening situation or object, a subjective feel of discomfort and physiological changes (Born, 2008).

Anxiety is to a larger degree a diffusive reaction to non-specific stimuli. If the danger is recognizable and linked to real, outdoor object and if the child knows or can recognize the threat, then fear can be described (Perkins et al., 2007).

Anxiety is a negative emotional state in which feelings of threat, immediate danger without concrete shape or idea, marked with unclear, diffusive tension, disquiet, disturbance, discomfort, and fear can be observed.

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